

## LESSON 5A—NARRATIVE: WHAT SHELTER WAS MOST POPULAR AMONG ANCIENT PEOPLE?

*The tipi was the most popular form of shelter among ancient people.*

Think about the home in which you live. It may be a modular home or one built of frame construction. Your family may have built the house, or it may have been built by someone else. Many people purchase a home from a former owner. That way, the house is ready for you and your family to move into with a minimal amount of work. Your home provides shelter, safety, and warmth.

Montana's weather is very unpredictable, presenting extreme and dangerous conditions. Winter in our state has periods of severe cold, with strong winds. Summer's weather can be very hot and often dry, increasing the risk of wildfires. Rain, hail, or snow may fall most any season of the year. Extreme weather usually finds most families safe in their homes. Sometimes a family is camping or traveling when severe weather arises. But if the weather gets too bad, you can always return to the safety of your vehicle, or pack up and go home.

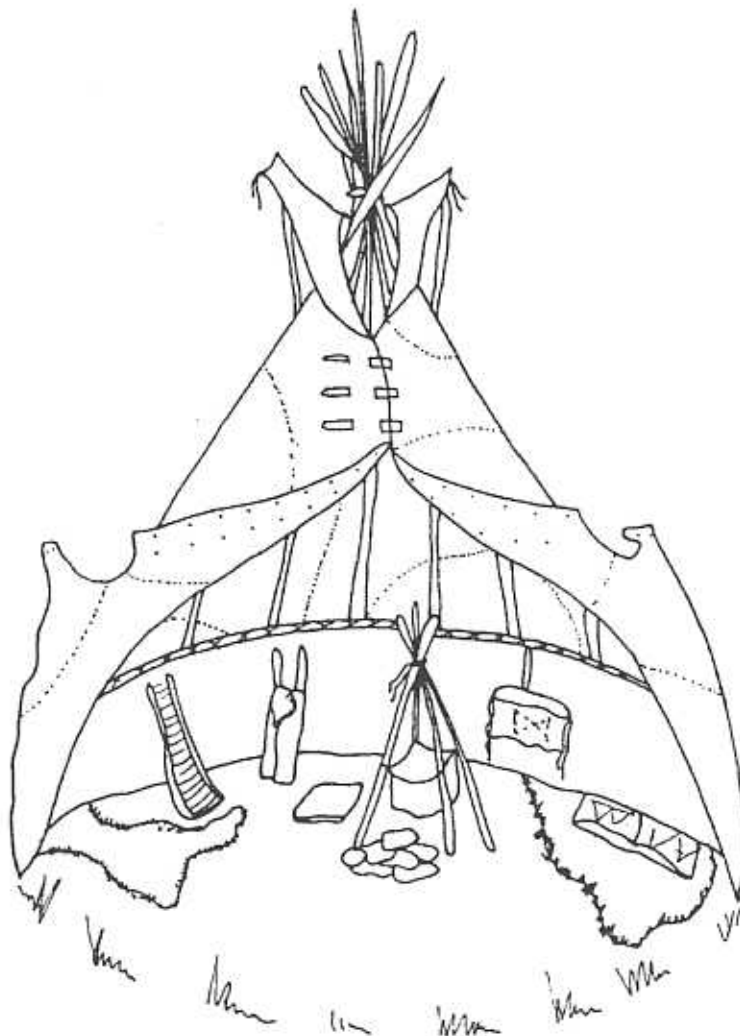
Montana's ancient people did not have the choices we have today. They were **nomadic** hunters and gatherers, tracking animals and collecting plants. Prehistoric people migrated with the animals' search for better forage. They moved as plants matured with the seasons. They lived year-round in a fashion similar to camping, and they chose different campsites at different times of the year. The natural elements of the past were as varied as they are today, and frequently more severe.

Having the right type of shelter was critical for survival in the unpredictable weather of Montana's past.

For nomadic people, a shelter had to be light and easy to transport. During most of Montana's prehistory, people had no horses to haul their belongings. They would use a **dog travois** to haul some of their belongings and carry the rest on their backs. Because ancient people moved often, their shelters also had to be easy to assemble and disassemble. They did build some more permanent shelters in locations they visited every year on a seasonal basis. But usually they had to bring or build their shelter each time they made a new camp. Like today's homes, ancient shelters needed to provide warmth in winter and stay cool in summer.

For prehistoric people of Montana, the most familiar type of dwelling, and the most recent, was the **tipi**. A tipi is **conical** in shape, with long, narrow lodgepole pine or fir poles placed upright and leaning together, lending support to each other. Animal hides sewn together formed the outer **covering**. Most likely, buffalo hides were the preferred covering. Between ten and fifteen buffalo hides were needed for a tipi cover. If buffalo hide was not available, the people sewed smaller hides together. According to historic accounts from Plains tribes, each cover probably lasted for only one to three years before it had to be replaced. The exteriors of tipis—also

The tipi provided ancient people living on the open plains of Montana with warmth and comfort. *Courtesy Montana Historical Society.*



judging from early accounts—were sometimes, but not always, painted with various symbols and designs. With the arrival of Euro-Americans, Indian people also began to use canvas for tipi covers.

**Tipi rings**, or stone circles, are believed to be archaeological sites where prehistoric tipis were set up. A tipi ring is made up of the rocks placed around the bottom of a tipi to hold the hide cover down. This kept out small animals, insects, and cold drafts. People also used pegs to hold the covering on the ground. Prehistoric people also probably lined their tipis

with a second hide covering that they hung from the tipi interior as added insulation from cold weather. The earliest evidence of tipi rings in Montana dates to more than five thousand years ago, but most of those we see today are probably less than one thousand years old.

Archaeologists find tipi rings throughout Montana, especially on the northern plains or Hi-Line. They usually find tipi rings near water, firewood, and other resources that people needed to camp. In the plains area, campsites are often located on terraces above river drainages. Occasionally, the people

used mountain locations on or near ridges, possibly to avoid snowdrifts. Some tipi rings may actually be look-outs or defense sites. Prehistoric people used some locations repeatedly for campsites, as indicated by many stone circles, the varying depths of the stones of different rings, and evidence of rings touching or overlapping each other.

Some archaeologists believe that, during the **"Dog Days"**—in the time before horses when dogs pulled the travois—tipi size was smaller. When horses arrived in Montana during the 1700s, the people could take larger loads, and so tipi size became larger. The size of ancient tipis—based on the size of the tipi rings—varied from only four feet in diameter to eighteen feet across.

Because large animal hides were easily available to make coverings, the tipi form of shelter was common in Montana and used by many different prehistoric groups. Hides could be readily replaced as they wore out or were ruined. Tipis could also be assembled and disassembled very quickly. One **ethnographer**—an



anthropologist who studies living societies—has observed that a single Kootenai woman could set up or take down a tipi in fifteen minutes. A rapid move was required if a buffalo herd was sighted, or enemies were approaching. The tipi was a perfect tent for the nomads of Montana, suited to the mobile **lifeway** of Montana's prehistoric people. It is likely that most groups used tipis as shelter during all seasons of the year, at least after four thousand years ago. Some bands, however, may have chosen alternate shelters during different seasons.

Tipi rings are the archaeological evidence of ancient tipis. Prehistoric people used the circle of stones to hold down the tipi's hide cover. *Tim Urbaniak, photographer*

**LESSON 5A—VOCABULARY: WHAT SHELTER WAS MOST POPULAR AMONG ANCIENT PEOPLE?**

conical \_\_\_\_\_

covering \_\_\_\_\_

dog days \_\_\_\_\_

dog travois \_\_\_\_\_

ethnographer \_\_\_\_\_

lifeway \_\_\_\_\_

nomadic \_\_\_\_\_

tipi \_\_\_\_\_

tipi rings \_\_\_\_\_

## LESSON 5A—ARCH ACTIVITY: MAKE A TIPI

Grades: 3–8

Time: 60 minutes

Content Area: math and arts

Who: small groups

Materials (per group/tipi):

double sheet or old blanket, string,  
marker, scissors, paint, 3 wooden  
poles (8 feet long), smaller sticks  
(9 inches long), thick twine or rope,  
several mid-sized rocks

---

### OBJECTIVE AND OUTCOME

- Students will gain knowledge of how a tipi was constructed, using modern materials.
- Students will design and construct a tipi.

### ACTIVITY

1. Determine the size of a group. Each group will build a tipi.

2. Cut a piece of string 20 inches shorter than the poles. Hold one end of the string in the center of the long side of the sheet or old blanket. Tie a marker to the other end. Use the string as a compass and swing the pencil end of the string on the sheet, drawing a semicircle. Cut off the excess material.

3. Paint the cover. Use sticks as brushes.

4. Hold the three wooden poles in a tripod position. Intertwine one end of the long rope back and forth where the three poles meet to lash them together. The remainder of the rope should hang down the middle and be wrapped around one of the rocks. This serves as a weight to secure the frame.

5. Wrap the cover carefully around the poles. Hold in place, making sure the overlap is between poles. Where the cover overlaps, place wooden pegs (as described below) to hold the cover in position. From the top, at the

overlap, measure down every 6 inches and mark. Do this about halfway down. Cut 2 small vertical slits, 4 inches apart, through both layers of fabric at each measurement. Thread a wooden peg, 9 inches long, through the two slits.

6. Place the remaining rocks around the outer edge of the tipi, as a tipi ring.

### EXTENSIONS

3–5:

- Research vocabulary.

See: Lesson 5A—Vocabulary

- Write stories about fictional events in an Indian tipi village.
- Research Indian symbols.

6–8:

- Apply math to the calculation of living space (area and volume) of a tipi as a circle and a cone.